

## Creating a Comfortable Learning Environment

Comfort is an aspect of living that everyone strives for. Especially in education, but how often do students actually feel comfortable in the classroom? “**Comfort was often the last thing on the minds of professionals** back in a time when schools were designed to prepare workers for the factory” says The George Lucas Educational Foundation’s Edutopia. Is comfort still the last thing on the minds of professionals today? According to John Dewey in the 1900’s “nature has not adapted the young animal to the narrow desk, the crowded curriculum, the silent absorption of complicated facts.” In other words, students are not able to adapt their learning to classrooms that do not provide comfort. Although attention to whether students feel comfortable in the classroom may be more prominent than they were back in the day, some teachers still aren’t creating classrooms that allow students to feel comfortable with learning, which includes striving for higher thinking, and taking risks to build on their learning. The problem isn’t that teachers don’t want to create comfortable learning environments. The problem is teachers don’t know *how* to create comfortable learning environments. Here are some physical changes that teachers can make to help create comfortable learning environments, which will be discussed.

- Replacing hard chairs for softer seats
- Providing areas where students can unwind
- Limiting overcrowded spaces
- Decorating your room with positive posters
- Minimizing unnecessary background noise
- Comfortable room temperature

### **Physical Comfort**

**Replacing hard chairs for softer seats** is a great way to improve the comfort of your classroom. Students are in school for roughly six hours a day. A typical class period usually involves students sitting down for long periods of time. Students can often become restless when they are forced to sit in the same chair for an entire class period. This can cause students to become distracted and to lose focus on the content being taught. By providing softer seats and more comfortable chairs it helps students stay focused because they are not distracted by thoughts of how uncomfortable they are. Another idea is to implement a lot of kinesthetic activities into your lessons. When you give students the opportunity to move around, it not only helps students relieve some pent up energy, but it also helps them become engaged in the content since the activity will require them to do more than to just sit.

**Providing areas where students can unwind** is another great method for creating a comfortable physical classroom environment. Maybe a student is irking to draw, write, move around, or even listen to music, establishing an area in your classroom where students can unwind and exacerbate energy comfortably while still learning the material is important. MI activity stations are a great way to allow students to learn the content, while also allowing them to release pent up energy in an interest based way. If you set up stations around the room with each station tailored to a specific MI that relates to the

material you are teaching, students will be more inclined to want to learn the material because they are presented with the opportunity to decide how they want to learn the content based on their interests.

**Limiting overcrowded spaces** is a must when creating a comfortable physical learning environment. Middle school teacher, Amanda Fortin, says:

*A lot of the classrooms consist of the desks being arranged in rows and I feel uncomfortable with that because it makes the students feel isolated. It also does not provide a lot of room for students (or myself) to move around easily.*

Amanda has a point. Rows tend to cause overcrowded spaces, which makes it difficult to form groups easily and it does not give off the vibe of a comfortable classroom setting. By pushing the desks together and creating tables or even by forming a U shape with desks, it opens up your classroom and provides more space for students to feel like they can not only literally breathe, but also breathe in what they are learning in a comfortable manner.

**Decorating your room with student work or inspirational posters** can improve the comfort of your students' learning environment tremendously. When you hang student work up in the classroom, it sends a message to the students that their learning is significant to you, which further elaborates to you proving to your students that you care about their education. Amanda uses student work and posters to improve the comfort of her classroom.

*When I taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I would put student work up and colorful posters. I do this not only because I value all of the learning that the students have accomplished, but I also do this because the classroom should be a tool for students. If students have a difficult time trying to solve a problem or answer a question, I always remind them that if you don't have the answer, you may be able to find it in the room. I'm not flat out giving them the answer, but the classroom should be designed as a tool for them therefore I think it is important to get that point across to students.*

Color is also a great way to enhance the comfort of your classroom, but don't use too much of it. Some students with specific learning needs can become overstimulated by a lot of color. Even color should be in moderation.

**Minimizing unnecessary background noise** may seem like a minor thing when creating a comfortable learning environment, but it actually creates a huge impact. Things such as air conditioners or heaters can be extremely distracting to students and these noises may drown out your own teaching voice, which causes students to lose interest and become easily lost in other thoughts. Students who share their ideas during class may also have a hard time communicating their ideas to others because the sound muffles their voice. It is hard enough for students to work up the courage to share an idea once, but to have to repeat their thoughts and ideas multiple times is more than most students are willing to handle and the distracting background noises may actually discourage students from participating in class discussions. Talk to your school principal about it and maybe you can work something out so that you can still have a heated or air conditioned room, but without all of the noise that comes with it.

**Providing a comfortable room temperature** is also essential to creating a comfortable learning environment. How many of your students have often complained how cold it is or how hot it is in your room? These fluctuating temperature changes can cause students to become distracted during class because their thoughts are focused on how uncomfortable they are and not on the material that you are trying to teach. Also talk to your school principal about this issue or take matters into your own hands. For example, if your room is too warm for your students' liking, open a few windows. If your room is too cold for your students' liking, suggest that they bring sweaters to class in preparation for when the room transitions into a cold spell.

### **Mental and Emotional Comfort**

Allowing your students to feel mentally and emotionally comfortable in your classroom is another key component of creating a safe learning environment. Here is what Amanda had to say about this:

*Building a relationship with every student is important. Even though we often don't have time to do that, I work really hard on this aspect of creating a safe learning environment. If your students are not comfortable with you or if they are not comfortable with their other classmates, then it won't work. If you are invested in your students, then they will work harder. That is what I have experienced.*

Here are some suggestions for how to make your classroom more emotionally and mentally safe.

- Create a bulletin board of yourself (let your students get to know you)
- Create multiple intelligences boards (get to know your students on an academic level)
- Have the students participate in interest surveys (get to know your students on a personal level)
- Get the students to know each other (using cooperative groups)
- Focus a lot of your energy on establishing relationships in the first couple of weeks

Everyone likes to feel comfortable and one of the most critical aspects of successful learning is comfort. Students need to feel comfortable both physically, mentally, and emotionally in order to learn. They need to feel comfortable with the thought of giving an incorrect answer in class without being ridiculed by the teacher or other students. They need to feel comfortable with the material that they have been taught as well as feel comfortable illustrating to the teacher that they have mastered it. They also need to just feel physically comfortable. You can't sleep when you aren't comfortable and the same goes for learning. Learning isn't possible if students aren't comfortable, therefore, it is important for us as teachers to provide students a comfortable learning environment on a physical, mental, and emotional level.

### **References**

Gillette, Hope. "Mental and Physical Comfort in Classrooms, Ideal Learning environment." *Voxxi RSS*. N.p., 26 Sept. 2012. Web. 27 Mar. 2014.

### **Knowing Your Students**

Knowing your students includes both how they learn and who they are as individuals. It is important for teachers to understand both aspects when it comes to each of their students.

### **Who They Are as Learners**

Knowing how each individual student learns is significant in helping your students feel safe in the classroom. By taking the time to know how your students learn, you are continuing to illustrate to them that you are invested in their education and that investment can go a long way with several students. Knowing your students enable you to:

- Create a psychologically safe environment for every learner
- Determine each student's readiness for learning
- Identify multiple access points to the curriculum to increase engagement and success
- Develop and demonstrate greater emotional intelligence in the classroom

### **Creating a Psychologically Safe Environment**

Students crave affection, belonging and esteem. While getting to know students, a teacher can develop a connection not just with one student, but among many students. When a teacher gains the trust and respect of his or her students, it creates a psychologically safe atmosphere in the classroom. Students need this type of security in order to experience deep learning and high order thinking. If students feel like they belong and are significant, then they are more likely to take risks with their learning.

### **Determining Readiness**

Teachers make decisions everyday about their student's individual readiness and group readiness (involving the readiness of the entire class). In order to meet the learning needs of the classroom, teachers need to keep in mind both individual readiness and group readiness. Therefore, if there are different readiness levels in the classroom, then different levels of challenge must also be provided. When thinking about learning readiness, as teacher we must not only consider the skills and understanding that students illustrate in new learning experience, but we must also remember their past learning experiences as well.

### **Using Student Interests to Make Connections to Learning**

Knowing your students allow you to determine ways to make connections between the content and their lives. By knowing what your students are interested in, you are not only able to draw them into the content, but you are also able to get them motivated about learning the content. This is where incorporating multiple intelligences into your classroom can be extremely helpful in creating a comfortable classroom environment because it allows students to understand the content through doing an activity that they feel comfortable with.

### **Illustrating Emotional Intelligence**

Teachers often acquire an increased amount of emotional intelligence when they get to know their students. Getting to know students provokes teachers to have more empathy, more patience, and more flexibility of thought. It also allows teachers to gain a better understanding of what the student's

responsibility is and what the teacher's responsibility is. Emotional intelligence is beneficial to both the teacher and his or her students because teachers are encouraged to ask questions about students and eradicate negative attitudes and judgments about students. By illustrating that you have a lot of emotional intelligence, you are setting a good example for your students of how to use emotional intelligence for positive purposes.

### **Other Suggestions to Consider**

**Having students fill out a multiple intelligence survey is a great way to understand how each student learns best.** Knowing this information can allow you to create assignments that allow students to explore the content that you are teaching them in a way that they feel comfortable and safe in because they are familiar with it.

**Don't be afraid to check in with students to see how they are doing on an assignment.** Walk around the room and ask students questions about what they are working on. Don't loom over them or stand behind them as you silently look at what they are doing and then walk away. This can come off as intimidating to students and may, in fact, encourage them to hide their work from you because they feel like you may have been disappointed in their work. Ask your students questions about what they are having trouble understanding and present them with positive feedback about what they have accomplished so far. Keep illustrating to your students that you care about their success as learners.

**Learning profiles are a great way to help you get to know your students.** Learning profiles can consist of a student's biological traits, cultural and societal factors, emotional and social influences, academic performance, and learning preferences. help you meet the challenge of coming to know your students, we recommend developing student learning profiles to capture five important dimensions of learning identity: *biological traits, cultural and societal factors, emotional and social influences, academic performance, and learning preferences*. Obviously you won't receive all of this information in one sitting, but over a period of time, you should be able to create learning profiles for all of your students, which will be useful information for you and other teachers to use as you discover it and in the future.

### **Who Students are as Individuals**

It is important to not just know where each student stands academically, but it is also important to know where each students stands as an individual. Amanda says:

*Just chatting with each student and saying "Hey, how are you?" illustrates to each student that you care and are interested in their lives. Students love it if you will listen to them. Some students don't get the opportunity at home to tell their parents about themselves.*

Whether you teach students who have great home lives or awful home lives, illustrating to students that you care says a lot to them. They will understand that you aren't just invested in them as learners, but that you are also invested in them as future citizens who supports both who they are as learners and who they are as individuals. Here are some tips to help you discover who your students are as individuals.

- Implement “get to know each other” games during the first few weeks of classes
- Have them do “free writes” where they get to write about what is going on with their lives
- Design activities that evoke students to ask appropriate questions about you or other students
- Create a responsive classroom, which is designed for you to get know students and for students to get to know each other
- Possible activity: acquire a roll of toilet paper and for every square they have to say a fact about themselves (Amanda’s idea)

Creating relationships between you and each of your students is a fundamental aspect of education and getting to know your students is the only way that you will establish positive relationships with each student. Whether it is on an academic or a personal level, illustrating to your students that you are invested in their education does wonders for their self-esteem and motivation as a learner.

## References

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Sylwester, Robert. "How Emotions Affect Learning." (n.d.): 106-14. Print.

## Being Approachable

It is important for students to feel comfortable around the teacher in order to create a safe learning environment. This all comes back to establishing positive relationships with students and being approachable is one way to help build positive relationships with students. Amanda says:

*If students are terrified of you, then it won't work. You want to convey the message to students "Hey, I am here for you, but if you need anything just let me know!" Students don't respond well to teachers who use stern voices or have a negative tone. A lot of it is how you talk to them and how you respond to them even when things get frustrating. If you don't raise your voice it will help them respond better because they will feel like you are treating them like a normal person (some students may hear so much yelling at home that it only intensifies what they feel when they are at home). If you can laugh with your students about something, that will help. As difficult as this is, it is also important to create a relationship with every student. Circulating around the room also helps, but it continues to show students that you are interested in your learning as opposed to just sitting at your desk not paying attention. If they are relaxed, they will come to you. It's all about comfort.*

As Amanda puts it, students will not seek help or assistance from you if they do not feel comfortable or relaxed about the idea of approaching you. Making your students feel comfortable with you is essential to the success of their learning while they are in your classroom. Below are some suggestions for how you can appear and seem more approachable to your students.

**1. Shouting doesn't get you anywhere.** Look at your pupils like they are consumers. If you scream and shout at them, you aren't going to get them to buy into what you are saying.

**2. People don't like it when they are fearful of something, especially students who are faced with a scary teacher.** If you intimidate students, they are going to want to skip school rather than pursue learning.

**3. Try not to let your frustration show.** Students can sense when you are tense, which makes them feel uncomfortable. You immediately seem more approachable if you just relax, which makes the classroom a more optimal learning environment.

**4. Encourage and evoke students to ask questions.** Asking questions can be one of the most nerve racking and uncomfortable aspects of learning in a classroom. Demonstrate to students that it is perfectly okay to ask questions to promote a safe learning environment.

**5. Motivate students!** Interact with students and discuss what the material that you taught them in a friendly manner. This helps boost both their confidence and their enthusiasm. Don't try to be the cool teacher who lets your students get away with things. Sure, you may be well liked, but students won't take you seriously as a teacher thus they sure won't be coming to you for questions about their learning.

**6. Avoid being a dictator.** You need your students to see you like you are a mentor, but for the entire class. You'll get better result from students if you help *guide* students in their learning, rather than ordering students around.

**7. Be approachable toward parents too.** If you are approachable to their students, they are less likely to complain about you to their parents. With this information from their kids, the parents will be more likely to go to you if they have any concerns rather than going immediately to your employer.

**8. Strive to impress your colleagues.** Earning the respect of your colleagues helps establish yourself within a school community. If your students say good things about you, you will start building a good reputation not just with your students, but also with your colleagues. This kind of approachability can also land you other potential job opportunities.

## **Final Thoughts**

Being approachable is a critical component of creating a safe learning environment. If you don't appear friendly and capable of possessing human emotions, then students will avoid you at all costs. Remember to smile, don't be afraid to laugh, and demonstrate to students that you are human and that you are there to help them succeed. Once again, if you show students that you are invested in their learning, then they will invest in their learning.

## **References**

"Top Tips for Teachers: 10 Reasons to Be Approachable." - Capita PLC. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Mar. 2014.

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